

March 5, 2007

President Bush Discusses Western Hemisphere Policy

Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center
Washington, D.C.

 [Fact Sheet: Advancing the Cause of Social Justice in the Western Hemisphere](#)

 [In Focus: Global Diplomacy](#)



[White House News](#)

1:13 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. (Applause.) Please be seated -- si ntese. Buenas tardes. Gracias por la bienvenida. For those of you not from Texas, that means, good afternoon. (Laughter.) And thank you for the welcome. I'm honored to be back again with the men and women of the Hispanic Chamber. I appreciate your hospitality.

I'm pleased to report the economy of the United States is strong, and one of the reasons why is because the entrepreneurial spirit of America is strong. And the entrepreneurial spirit of America is represented in this room. (Applause.)

I thank you for the role of the Chamber. I appreciate so very much the work you do with our banks to help move capital. I appreciate so very much the fact that you recognize outstanding Latina business women through your Anna Maria Arias Fund. I appreciate the fact that you say loud and clear, el sue o Americano es para todos.

I strongly believe that the role of government is to make it clear that America is the land of opportunity. I think the best way to do that is to encourage business formation, encourage ownership; is to say, if you work hard and dream big, you can realize your dreams here in America. I also believe it's essential to make sure that when people take risk, that they're able to keep more of their own taxes. Congress needs to make the tax cuts we passed a permanent part of the tax code. (Applause.)

I know that in order for us to make sure el sue o Americano es para todos that we have an education system that sets high standards for all children, demands accountability in our schools so that we can say with certainty, children from all backgrounds are able to read and write and add and subtract. That is why I believe it is essential that Congress reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act.

I think it's very important for us to continue to expand federal contracting opportunities for small businesses, and to make sure that America is a place of promise and hope. It is important and essential that Congress pass comprehensive immigration reform that I can sign into law. (Applause.)

I want to talk about another important priority for our country, and that is helping our neighbors to the south of us build a better and productive life. Thursday, Laura and I are going to leave on a trip that will take us to Brazil and Uruguay and Colombia, y Guatemala, y por fin, Mexico. These are countries that are part of a region that has made great strides toward freedom and prosperity. They've raised up new democracies. They've enhanced and undertaken fiscal policies that bring stability.

Yet, despite the advances, tens of millions in our hemisphere remain stuck in poverty, and shut off from the promises of the new century. My message to those trabajadores y campesinos is, you have a friend in the United States of America. We care about your plight. (Applause.)

David, thank you very much for being the Chairman of this important organization and for the invitation. I want to thank Michael Barrera, who is the President and CEO of the Hispanic Chamber. I thank my friend y Tejano, Massey Villarreal, who is with us today. Massey, it's good to see you again. You've got a barba crecida. (Laughter.) Looking good, though, man.

I thank Frank Lopez, who is the President and CEO of Chamber Foundation. I want to thank members of my Cabinet who have come. I think it's a good sign that -- this administration recognizes the importance of having a neighborhood that is peaceful and flourishing -- that we have so many members of the Cabinet who have joined us today. I want to thank Carlos Guitierrez. (Applause.) Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao -- Madam Secretary. (Applause.) Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt. (Applause.) Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings -- Madam Secretary. (Applause.) Thank you all for coming.

Tom Shannon, representing the State Department. Ambassador Randy Tobias, who runs USAID, who, by the way, prior to this assignment, led one of the most important initiatives in my administration that has helped to fight the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. I appreciate your service there, and I now appreciate your service at USAID, Randy.

I want to thank John Veroneau, who is with us today, who is the Deputy U.S. Trade Representative. We've got members of the United States Congress with us today, powerful members of the Senate and the House. I am so grateful they are here, starting with Senator Dick Lugar of the great state of Indiana. Appreciate you coming. (Applause.) Norm Coleman from Minnesota. Senator, thank you for being here. (Applause.) A buddy of mine, Jerry Weller, Congressman Weller from Illinois. Proud you're here. Thanks for coming. (Applause.)

Los embajadores que estan aqui -- the ambassadors. Thank you all for being here. I see some of the ambassadors for the countries to which I'll be going. I'm sure all of them are here, and I appreciate you coming. Thanks for your time.

This is an important speech for me today. It's a speech that sets out a direction for this country in regards to our neighborhood. A former President gave such a speech 46 years ago this month. President John Kennedy spoke to ambassadors from across the Americas, this time in the East Room of the White House. He began by citing the early movements of independence in the Latin American republics. He invoked the dream of a hemisphere growing in liberty and prosperity. That's what he talked about 46 years ago. He proposed a bold new Alliance for Progress, to help the countries of this hemisphere meet the basic needs of their people -- safe homes and decent jobs and good schools, access to health care.

In the years since President Kennedy spoke, we have witnessed great achievements for freedom in this neighborhood. As recently as a generation ago, this region was plagued by military dictatorship and consumed by civil strife. Today 34 members of the OAS have democratic constitutions. And only one member country lives under a leader not of its people's choosing.

From New York to Rio de Janeiro to Buenos Aires and Montreal, we speak different languages, but our democracies all derive their legitimacy from the same source -- the consent of the governed. The expansion of freedom has brought our societies much closer. Today the most important ties between North and South America are not government to government, they are people to people. And those ties are growing. These ties are growing because of our churches and faith-based institutions, which understand that the call to love our neighbors as ourselves does not stop at our borders.

These ties are growing because of our businesses, which trade and invest billions in each other's countries. These ties are growing because of the outreach of our universities, which brings thousands of exchange students and teachers to their campuses. These ties are growing because of the estimated \$45 billion that workers in the United States send back to their families in Latin America and the Caribbean each year, one of the largest private economic initiatives in the world.

In all these ways, our two continents are becoming more than neighbors united by the accident of geography. We're becoming a community linked by common values and shared interests in the close bonds of family and friendship. These growing ties have helped advance peace and prosperity on both continents. Yet amid the progress we also see terrible want. Nearly one out of four people in Latin America lives on less than \$2 a day. Many children never finish grade school; many mothers never see a doctor. In an age of growing prosperity and abundance, this is a scandal -- and it's a challenge. The fact is that tens of millions of our brothers and sisters to the south have seen little improvement in their daily lives. And this has led some to question the value of democracy.

The working poor of Latin America need change, and the United States of America is committed to that change. It is in our national interests, it is in the

interest of the United States of America to help the people in democracies in our neighborhood succeed. When our neighbors are prosperous and peaceful, it means better opportunities and more security for our own people. When there are jobs in our neighborhood, people are able to find work at home and not have to migrate to our country. When millions are free from poverty, societies are stronger and more hopeful.

So we're helping to increase opportunity by relieving debt and opening up trade, encouraging reform, and delivering aid that empowers the poor and the marginalized. And the record of this administration in promoting social justice is a strong record and an important record. Social justice begins with building government institutions that are fair and effective and free of corruption.

In too many places in the Americas, a government official is seen as someone who serves himself at the expense of the public good, or serves only the rich and the well-connected. No free society can function this way. Social justice begins with social trust. So we're working with our partners to change old patterns and ensure that government serves all its citizens.

One of the most important changes we're making is the way we deliver aid. We launched a new program called the Millennium Challenge Account, which provides increased aid to nations that govern justly, invest in the education and health of their people, and promote economic freedom. So far, we've signed Millennium Challenge compacts with three Latin American nations. We've also signed an agreement with a fourth country that is working to meet the standards to qualify for a compact on its own. In the coming years, these agreements will provide a total of \$885 million in new aid, so long as these countries continue to meet the standards of the Millennium Challenge program. We'll send more as we reach more agreements with other nations.

By the way, this aid comes on top of the standard bilateral assistance that we provide. When I came into office, the United States was sending about \$860 million a year in foreign aid to Latin America and the Caribbean. Last year, we nearly doubled that amount, to a total of \$1.6 billion. Altogether, thanks to the good work of members of the United States Congress, we have sent a total of \$8.5 billion to the region with a special focus on helping the poor.

Let me share with you one example of how our aid is working for people in the region. It's a small example, but it had profound impact. A few years ago, we funded a project to help a town in Paraguay. We set up a website that makes all local government transactions public, from budget spending to employee salaries. The purpose was to help the people of Villarrica improve their local governance through greater transparency. It was a small gesture at first. But when they brought transparency into their government, they discovered that some government employees had used fake receipts to embezzle thousands of dollars from the city government. The mayor informed the public, and the

employees who had stolen the money were tried and convicted, and they paid it back. For the people of Paraguay, this was an historic achievement. The local government had called its own officials to account at a public and transparent trial.

The United States can help bring trust to their governments by instilling transparency in our neighborhood. It didn't take much of a gesture, but it had a profound impact.

We're working for similar results in other nations. In El Salvador, we opened one of our international law enforcement academies. The new academy is helping governments in the region build effective criminal justice systems, by training law enforcement officers to combat the drug lords and the terrorists and the criminal gangs and the human traffickers. Our efforts to strengthen these civic institutions are also supported by more than government, but by private programs run by U.S. law schools and professional associations and in volunteer organizations.

In the coming months, this administration will convene a White House conference on the Western Hemisphere that will bring together representatives from the private sector, and non-governmental organizations, and faith-based groups and volunteer associations. The purpose is to share experiences, and discuss effective ways to deliver aid and build the institutions necessary for strong civil society. Is it in our interest we do so? Absolutely, it's in our interests. A transparent neighborhood will yield to a peaceful neighborhood, and that's in the interests of all citizens of our country.

Social justice means meeting basic needs. The most precious resource of any country is its people, and in the Americas, we are blessed with an abundance of talented and hardworking citizens -- decent, honorable people who work hard to make a living for their families. Without basic necessities like education and health care and housing, it is impossible for people to realize their full potential, their God-given potential.

Helping people reach their potential begins with good education. That's why the Secretary of Education is here. Many people across the Americas either have no access to education for their children or they cannot afford it. If children don't learn how to read, write, and add and subtract, they're going to be shut off for the jobs of the 21st century. They'll be condemned to a life on the margins, and that's not acceptable.

The United States is working for an Americas where every child has access to a decent school. It is a big goal, but it is a necessary goal, as far as we're concerned. When people in our neighborhood reach their full potential, it benefits the people of the United States.

Over the past three years, we've provided more than \$150 million -- three years time -- spent \$150 million for education programs throughout the region, with a special focus on rural and indigenous areas. Today I announce a new partnership for Latin American youth that's going to build on these efforts. This partnership will devote an additional \$75 million over the next years -- three years to help thousands more young people improve their English and have the opportunity to study here in the United States. I think it's good policy when people from our neighborhood come to our country to study. (Applause.)

I hope this warms the heart of our fellow citizens when I share this story. In the mountains of Guatemala, we established a project that helped raise the number of children who complete first grade from 51 percent to 71 percent. In Peru, we helped create the Opening Doors Program to help girls get through grade school. That program is succeeding, and it is self-sustaining. Across Latin America and the Caribbean our centers of excellence for teacher training -- we set up these centers, and we've trained 15,000 teachers; nearly 15,000 people have benefitted. Does that matter? Of course, it matters. When you train a teacher, you're really helping provide literacy for a child.

These teachers have helped improve the literacy skills for nearly 425,000 poor and disadvantaged students. It's important for our fellow citizens and the citizens in our neighborhood to understand that the United States of America is committed to helping people rise out of poverty, to be able to realize their full potential, and that starts with good education. By 2009, we expect to have trained a total of 20,000 teachers through these centers, and reach 650,000 students.

One person who has benefitted is a young girl in the Dominican Republic named Lorennny. By the time she was 10, she had been in first grade three times, and she had never passed. When her mother enrolled her in school again, Lorennny said, "Teacher, teach me to read, because I have learning problems." With patience and hard work, this good woman taught Lorennny to read and write. The teacher says that she had watched Lorennny blossom, and that she never would have been able to reach this girl without the know-how acquired through our teacher training program.

Societies can change one heart at a time. Here is an example of the good work of the American people taking place in our neighborhood. Another person who felt the impact of U.S. education assistance is a 25-year-old Mexican named Victor Lopez Ruiz. Victor's family lives in Chiapas, where opportunity is in short supply and the people tend to speak only the languages of the local communities. Victor's family sold their only real asset -- their cattle -- to pay for him to learn Spanish and finish high school.

In 2004, Victor won a USAID scholarship, which he used to learn English and study business in international trade at Scott Community College in Bettendorf,

Iowa. It must have been quite an experience for a man from Chiapas to head into the heartland. But he did so with help from the taxpayers of the United States -- for this reason: He goes back to Chiapas. He's working for his bachelor's degree in accounting, and then he's going to start a bakery that will support his family. Where the path for this man once looked grim, education has opened a new door. And as Victor said, "It changed my life."

There are countless people like Victor and Lorennny across our hemisphere, young people filled with talent and ambition only needing the chance of an education to unlock their full potential. Helping people reach their potential includes providing access to decent health care.

In many of the same areas where families have no schools, they have no access to medical care. Since I took office, we spent nearly \$1 billion on health care programs in the region, all aimed at sending a message to the people of Latin America: We care for you. Los corazones de las personas aqui in America son grandes. It's in our interests that we get good health care to citizens in our neighborhood.

Today, I'm going to announce a new initiative called the Health Care Professional Training Center in Panama that will serve all of Central America. I remember when Secretary Leavitt briefed me on this vital program. The center is going to teach students how to be good nurses and technicians and health care workers. We'll also train people so they can go back to their home countries and teach others the same skill sets.

In all these efforts, it's important for you to understand the role our United States military plays. In June, I'm going to send one of our Navy's medical ships, the Comfort, to the region. The Comfort will make port calls in Belize and Guatemala, and Panama, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, and Peru, and Ecuador, Colombia, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname. It's going to be busy. Altogether, the Comfort's doctors and nurses and health care professionals expect to treat 85,000 patients and conduct up to 1,5000 surgeries. These are people who need help. These are people who might not otherwise get the basic health care they need to realize a better tomorrow.

The Comfort was also going to partner with the Department of Health and Human Services on a new initiative to provide oral care to the region's poor. Dentists and hygienists will fill cavities and treat infections and provide treatment for the young children.

At the same time, military medical teams will be operating inland to help bring treatment and care to other communities. These teams do everything from vaccinating people against disease to building new medical clinics. The United States military is a symbol of strength for this nation. There's also a symbol of the

great compassion of the American people and our desire to help those in our neighborhood who need help.

With the deployment of the Comfort and the work of the military teams we're making it absolutely clear to people that we care. One good example is an area of Nicaragua. Santa Teresa is a rural area where 250 U.S. airmen, soldiers and Marines are now working with 30 members of the Nicaraguan army to build a medical clinic. Any families in the area live at homes built of scrap wood with dirt floors and doorless entryways. For most of them, a doctor is too far away, or too expensive. One man in Santa Teresa says, "The impact of this clinic is going to be tremendous."

I want you to hear the words of a fellow from Nicaragua. He said, "We're so glad you're here. People around here are noticing that the United States is doing something for them." And my message to the man is, we're proud to do so, and we do so because we believe in peace and the dignity of every human being on the face of the Earth. (Applause.)

Helping people reach their potential requires a commitment to improving housing. A strong housing industry can be an engine of economic growth and social stability and poverty reduction. Most Latin American capitals' high prices and high interest rates make good housing hard to afford. So the United States is launching a new effort to help build a market for affordable housing. Through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, we've provided more than \$100 million that is being used to help underwrite mortgages to working families in Mexico and Brazil and Chile and the countries of Central America. Now we're going to provide another \$385 million to expand these programs and help put the dream of home ownership within the reach of thousands of more people in our neighborhood.

On these three vital social issues -- education and health care and housing -- we're making a difference across the Americas. You see, by investing in programs and empower people, we will help the working families of our hemisphere build a more hopeful future for themselves.

Finally, social justice requires economies that make it possible for workers to provide for their families and to rise in society. For too long and in too many places, opportunity in Latin America has been determined by the accident of birth rather than by the application of talents and initiative. In his many writings, Pope John Paul II spoke eloquently about creating systems that respect the dignity of work and the right to private initiative. Latin America needs capitalism for the campesino, a true capitalism that allows people who start from nothing to rise as far as their skills and their hard work can take them. So the United States is helping these nations build growing economies that are open to the world, economies that will provide opportunity to their people.

One of the most important ways is by helping to relieve the burden of debt. In the past, many nations in this region piled up debt that they simply cannot repay. Every year their governments have to spend huge amounts of money just to make interest payments on the debt. So under my administration, we worked with the Group of 8 industrialized nations to reduce the debt of Latin America and Caribbean nations by \$4.8 billion. Members of the Inter-American Development Bank are close to an agreement on another debt relief initiative, and we look forward to helping them complete it. This agreement will cancel \$3.4 billion owed by some of the poorest countries in our hemisphere -- Bolivia and Guyana and Haiti and Honduras and Nicaragua. That works out to about \$110 for every man, woman and child in these countries, monies that their government should use to invest in the education and health of their citizens.

People in this region have the talent and drive they need to succeed. These are hardworking folks. I used to remind people in Texas, family values didn't stop at the Rio Grande River. There's a lot of mothers and dads in our neighborhood who care deeply about whether or not their children can grow up in a hopeful society. What they need is, in order to be able to realize that hope, is better access to capital. The entrepreneurial spirit is strong, strong in this room and it's strong throughout the region. But what we need is capital.

So over the past five years, the United States has devoted more than \$250 million to help the entrepreneurial spirit flourish in our region. This money includes micro credit loans for people starting small businesses. And these loans have been very successful, and I appreciate the Congress for appropriating money for these micro loans.

I'm also directing Secretary Rice and Secretary Paulson to develop a new initiative that will help U.S. and local banks improve their ability to extend good loans to small businesses. It's in our interest that businesses flourish in our own neighborhood. Flourishing business will provide jobs for people at home. They provide customers for U.S. products.

As we help local entrepreneurs get the capital they need we're also going to open up new opportunities through trade and investment. If you're a rural farmer scratching out a subsistence living, would you want to be able to sell your goods to new markets overseas? I think so. You're trying to make a living and the market is closed, it seems to make sense that you should want to be able to sell into a larger universe.

If you're a worker looking for a job, wouldn't you want more employers competing for your labor? The more employers there are in your neighborhood, the more likely it is you're going to find a better job. That's not really sophisticated math or economics, it just happens to be the truth -- la verdad.

When I took office, the United States had trade agreements with only two nations in our hemisphere. We've now negotiated agreements with 10 more. We're working for a strong agreement at the Doha Round of global trade talks that will level the playing field for farmers and workers and small businesses in our country and throughout the hemisphere.

Entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the markets we've helped open. Here's an interesting story for you. Mariano Can, he was an indigenous farmer in Guatemala whose land provided barely enough corn and beans to feed his family. He was scratching to get ahead. No one in his family had ever been to college. Most of the people in his village never got past the sixth grade. Mariano began tilling the fields at age seven. He had spent his life in grinding poverty, and it looked as though his children would suffer the same fate.

Trade helped him a lot, and here's how. To take advantage of new opportunities, he organized an association of small farmers called Labradores Mayas. These farmers began growing vegetables that they can sell overseas, high-valued crops like lettuce and carrots and celery. They took out a loan. Capital matters. It's important to have capital available if we want our neighbors to be able to realize a better tomorrow. And they built an irrigation system with that loan. And soon they were selling their crops to large companies like Wal-Mart Central America. With the money Mariano has earned, he was able to send his son to college. Today Labradores is a thriving business that supports more than a thousand jobs in production and transportation and the marketing of internationally sold vegetables.

One of the stops on my trip is going to be to see Mariano. I can't wait to congratulate him on not losing hope and faith. I also look forward to seeing a thriving enterprise that began with one dream. And it's in the interests of the United States to promote those dreams. People like Mariano are showing what the people of this region can accomplish when given a chance. By helping our neighbors build strong and vibrant economies, we increase the standard of living for all of us.

You know, not far from the White House is a statue of the great liberator, Simon Bolivar. He's often compared to George Washington -- Jorge W. (Laughter.) Like Washington, he was a general who fought for the right of his people to govern themselves. Like Washington, he succeeded in defeating a much stronger colonial power, and like Washington, he belongs to all of us who love liberty. One Latin American diplomat put it this way: "Neither Washington, nor Bolivar was destined to have children of their own, so that we Americans might call ourselves their children."

We are the sons and daughters of this struggle, and it is our mission to complete the revolution they began on our two continents. The millions across our hemisphere who every day suffer the degradations of poverty and hunger have a

right to be impatient. And I'm going to make them this pledge: The goal of this great country, the goal of a country full of generous people, is an Americas where the dignity of every person is respected, where all find room at the table, and where opportunity reaches into every village and every home. By extending the blessings of liberty to the least among us, we will fulfill the destiny of this new world and set a shining example for others.

Que Dios les bendiga.